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ISABELLA
OR THE POT
OF BASIL BY
JOHN KEATS

W. A. BUTTERFIELD
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IF · LOVE · IMPERSONATE · WAS · EVER ·
· DEAD ·
PALE · ISABELLA · KISSED · IT · AND · LOW
· MOANED ...

ISABELLA: OR THE POT OF BASIL
BY JOHN KEATS

A STORY FROM BOCCACCIO



WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY JESSIE M. KING



PHILADELPHIA: GEORGE W. JACOBS & COMPANY

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L·LOVE·IMPERSONATE·WAS·EVER·DEAD
PALE·ISABELLA·KISSED·IT·AND·LOW·MOANED

FRONTHPIECE

THE·TITLE·PAGE

O·DAY·THOU·WILT·NOT·SEE·HIM·NOR·TO·MORROW
AND·THE·NEXT·DAY·WILL·BE·A·DAY·OF·SORROW

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HE·HAD·NO·KNOWLEDGE·WHEN·THE·DAY·WAS·DONE
AND·THE·NEW·MORN·SHE·SAW·NOT·BUT·IN
PEACE·HUNG·OVER·HER·SWEET·BASIL·
EVERMORE

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YET·THEY·CONTRIVED·TO·STEAL·THE·BASIL·POT
AND·TO·EXAMINE·IT·IN·SECRET·PLACE

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June 12, 1947 until

40'40

88
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I A

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I

FAIR Isabel, poor simple Isabel !
Lorenzo, a young palmer in
Love's eye !

They could not in the self-same man-
sion dwell

Without some stir of heart, some
malady ;

They could not sit at meals but feel
how well

It soothed each to be the other by ;

They could not, sure, beneath the same
roof sleep

But to each other dream, and nightly
weep.

II

With every morn their love grew tenderer,
With every eve deeper and tenderer still ;
He might not in house, field, or garden stir,
But her full shape would all his seeing fill ;
And his continual voice was pleasanter
To her, than noise of trees or hidden rill ;
Her lute-string gave an echo of his name,
She spoilt her half-done broidery with the same.

III

He knew whose gentle hand was at the latch,
Before the door had given her to his eyes ;
And from her chamber-window he would catch
Her beauty farther than the falcon spies ;
And constant as her vespers would he watch,
Because her face was turn'd to the same skies ;
And with sick longing all the night outwear,
To hear her morning-step upon the stair.

IV

A whole long month of May in this sad
plight

Made their cheeks paler by the break
of June :

“To-morrow will I bow to my delight,

“To-morrow will I ask my lady’s
boon.”—

“O may I never see another night,

“Lorenzo, if thy lips breathe not
love’s tune.”—

So spake they to their pillows ; but, alas,
Honeyless days and days did he let pass ;

V

Until sweet Isabella’s untouched cheek
Fell sick within the rose’s just do-
main,

Fell thin as a young mother’s, who doth
seek

By every lull to cool her infant’s pain :

“How ill she is,” said he, “I may not
speak,

“And yet I will, and tell my love all
plain :

“If looks speak love-laws, I will drink
her tears,

“And at the least ’twill startle off her
cares.”

VI

So said he one fair morning, and all day
His heart beat awfully against his
side :

And to his heart he inwardly did pray
For power to speak ; but still the
ruddy tide
Stifled his voice, and puls'd resolve
away—

Fever'd his high conceit of such a
bride,
Yet brought him to the meekness of a
child :
Alas ! when passion is both meek and
wild !

VII

So once more he had wak'd and an-
guished
A dreary night of love and misery,
If Isabel's quick eye had not been wed
To every symbol on his forehead
high ;
She saw it waxing very pale and dead,
And straight all flush'd ; so, lisped
tenderly,
“Lorenzo”—here she ceas'd her timid
quest,
But in her tone and look he read the rest.

VIII

“O Isabella, I can half perceive
“That I may speak my grief into
thine ear ;
“If thou didst ever any thing believe,
“Believe how I love thee, believe
how near
“My soul is to its doom : I would not
grieve

“Thy hand by unwelcome pressing,
would not fear
“Thine eyes by gazing ; but I cannot
live
“Another night, and not my passion
shrive.

ix

“Love ! thou art leading me from win-
try cold,
“Lady ! thou leadest me to summer
clime,
“And I must taste the blossoms that
unfold
“In its ripe warmth this gracious
morning time.”

So said, his erewhile timid lips grew
bold,
And poesied with hers in dewy
rhyme:
Great bliss was with them, and great
happiness
Grew, like a lusty flower in June’s
caress.

x

Parting they seem’d to tread upon the
air,
Twin roses by the zephyr blown a-
part
Only to meet again more close, and
share
The inward fragrance of each other’s
heart.



TO-DAY · THOU · WILT · NOT · SEE · HIM · NOR
TO-MORROW ·
AND · THE · NEXT · DAY · WILL · BE · A · DAY · OF ·
· SORROW · ·

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She, to her chamber gone, a ditty fair
Sang, of delicious love and honey'd
dart ;
He with light steps went up a western
hill,
And bade the sun farewell, and joy'd
his fill.

xI

All close they met again, before the
dusk
Had taken from the stars its pleasant
veil,
All close they met, all eves, before the
dusk
Had taken from the stars its pleasant
veil,
Close in a bower of hyacinth and musk,
Unknown of any, free from whisper-
ing tale.
Ah ! better had it been for ever so,
Than idle ears should pleasure in their
woe.

xII

Were they unhappy then ?—It cannot
be—
Too many tears for lovers have been
shed,
Too many sighs give we to them in
fee,
Too much of pity after they are dead,
Too many doleful stories do we see,
Whose matter in bright gold were
best be read ;

Except in such a page where Theseus'
spouse
Over the pathless waves towards him
bows.

xiii

But, for the general award of love,
The little sweet doth kill much
bitterness ;
Though Dido silent is in under-grove,
And Isabella's was a great distress,
Though young Lorenzo in warm
Indian clove
Was not embalm'd, this truth is not
the less—
Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-
bowers,
Know there is richest juice in poison-
flowers.

xiv

With her two brothers this fair lady
dwelt,
Enriched from ancestral merchan-
dize,
And for them many a weary hand did
swelt
In torched mines and noisy factories,
And many once proud-quiver'd loins
did melt
In blood from stinging whip ;—with
hollow eyes
Many all day in dazzling river stood,
To take the rich-ored driftings of the
flood.

For them the Ceylon diver held his
breath,
And went all naked to the hungry shark;
For them his ears gush'd blood ; for
them in death
The seal on the cold ice with piteous
bark
Lay full of darts ; for them alone did
seethe
A thousand men in troubles wide
and dark :
Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy
wheel,
That set sharp racks at work, to pinch
and peel.

Why were they proud ? Because their
marble founts
Gush'd with more pride than do a
wretch's tears ?—
Why were they proud ? Because fair
orange-mounts
Were of more soft ascent than lazarus
stairs ?—
Why were they proud ? Because red-
lin'd accounts
Were richer than the songs of
Grecian years ?—
Why were they proud ? Again we ask
aloud,
Why in the name of Glory were they
proud ?

xvii

Yet were these Florentines as self-retired
In hungry pride and gainful cowardice,
As two close Hebrews in that land inspired,
Paledin and vineyarded from beggar-spies ;
The hawks of ship-mast forests—the untired
And pannier'd mules for ducats and old lies—
Quickcat's-pawson the generous stray-away,—
Great wits in Spanish, Tuscan, and Malay.

xviii

How was it these same ledger-men could spy
Fair Isabella in her downy nest ?
How could they find out in Lorenzo's eye
A straying from histoil? Hot Egypt's pest
Into their vision covetous and sly !
How could these money-bags see east and west?—
Yet so they did—and every dealer fair
Must see behind, as doth the hunted hare.

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ISABELLA AND THE POT OF BASIL

SHE HAD NO KNOWLEDGE WHEN THE DAY WAS DONE
AND THE NEW MORN SHE SAW NOT BUT IN PEACE HUNG OVER HER SWEET BASIL EVERMORE

xix

O eloquent and famed Boccaccio !
Of thee we now should ask forgiving
boon,
And of thy spicy myrtles as they blow,
And of thy roses amorous of the
moon,
And of thy lilies, that do paler grow
Now they can no more hear thy
ghittern's tune,
For venturing syllables that ill beseem
The quiet glooms of such a piteous
theme.

xx

Grant thou a pardon here, and then the
tale
Shall move on soberly, as it is meet ;
There is no other crime, no mad assail
To make old prose in modern rhyme
more sweet :
But it is done—succeed the verse or
fail—
To honour thee, and thy gone spirit
greet ;
To steady thee as a verse in English
tongue,
An echo of thee in the north-wind sung.

xxi

These brethren having found by many
signs
What love Lorenzo for their sister
had,

And how she lov'd him too, each un-
confines
His bitter thoughts to other, well nigh
mad
That he, the servant of their trade de-
signs,
Should in their sister's love be blithe
and glad,
When 'twas their plan to coax her by
degrees
To some high noble and his olive-trees.

xxii

And many a jealous conference had
they,
And many times they bit their lips
alone,
Before they fix'd upon a surest way
To make the youngster for his crime
atone ;
And at the last, these men of cruel clay
Cut Mercy with a sharp knife to the
bone ;
For they resolved in some forest dim
To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him.

xxiii

So on a pleasant morning, as he leant
Into the sun-rise, o'er the balustrade
Of the garden-terrace, towards him
they bent
Their footing through the dews ;
and to him said,
“ You seem there in the quiet of con-
tent,

“Lorenzo, and we are most loth to
invade

“Calm speculation ; but if you are
wise,

“Bestride your steed while cold is in the
skies.

XXIV

“To-day we purpose, ay, this hour we
mount

“To spur three leagues towards the
Apennine;

“Come down, we pray thee, ere the hot
sun count

“His dewy rosary on the eglantine.”

Lorenzo, courteously as he was wont,
Bow'd a fair greeting to these ser-
pents' whine ;

And went in haste, to get in readiness
With belt, and spur, and bracing hunts-
man's dress.

XXV

And as he to the court-yard pass'd along,
Each third step did he pause, and
listen'd oft

If he could hear his lady's matin-song,
Or the light whisper of her footstep
soft ;

And as he thus over his passion hung,
He heard a laugh full musical aloft ;
When, looking up, he saw her features
bright

Smile through an in-door lattice, all de-
light.

XXVI

“Love, Isabel!” said he, “I was in pain

“Lest I should miss to bid thee a
good morrow:

“Ah! what if I should lose thee, when
so fain

“I am to stifle all the heavy sorrow

“Of a poor three hours’ absence? but
we’ll gain

“Out of the amorous dark what day
doth borrow.

“Goodbye! I’ll soon be back.”—“Good
bye!” said she:—

And as he went she chanted merrily.

XXVII

So the two brothers and their murder’d
man

Rode past fair Florence, to where
Arno’s stream

Gurgles through straiten’d banks, and
still doth fan

Itself with dancing bulrush, and the
bream

Keeps head against the freshets. Sick
and wan

The brothers’ faces in the ford did seem,
Lorenzo’s flush with love.—They
pass’d the water

Into a forest quiet for the slaughter.

XXVIII

There was Lorenzo slain and buried in,
There in that forest did his great love
cease;

Ah! when a soul doth thus its freedom
win,

It aches in loneliness—is ill at peace
As the break-covert blood-hounds of
such sin :

They dipp'd their swords in the
water, and did tease

Their horses homeward, with con-
vulsed spur,

Each richer by his being a murderer.

xxix

They told their sister how, with sudden
speed,

Lorenzo had ta'en ship for foreign
lands,

Because of some great urgency and need
In their affairs, requiring trusty
hands.

Poor Girl! put on thy stifling widow's
weed,

And 'scape at once from Hope's
accursed bands ;

To-day thou wilt not see him, nor to-
morrow,

And the next day will be a day of
sorrow.

xxx

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be ;
Sorely she wept until the night came
on,

And then, instead of love, O misery !
She brooded o'er the luxury alone :

His image in the dusk she seem'd to
see,
And to the silence made a gentle
moan,
Spreading her perfect arms upon the
air,
And on her couch low murmuring,
“Where? O where?”

xxxI

But Selfishness, Love's cousin, held not
long
Its fiery vigil in her single breast;
She fretted for the golden hour, and
hung
Upon the time with feverish unrest—
Not long—for soon into her heart a
throng
Of higher occupants, a richer zest,
Came tragic; passion not to be sub-
dued,
And sorrow for her love in travels
rude.

xxxII

In the mid days of autumn, on their
eves
The breath of Winter comes from
far away,
And the sick west continually bereaves
Of some gold tinge, and plays a
roundelay
Of death among the bushes and the
leaves,

To make all bare before he dares to
stray

From his north cavern. So sweet
Isabel

By gradual decay from beauty fell,

XXXIII

Because Lorenzo came not. Often-
times

She ask'd her brothers, with an eye
all pale,

Striving to be itself, what dungeon
climes

Could keep him off so long? They
spake a tale

Time after time, to quiet her. Their
crimes

Came on them, like a smoke from
Hinnom's vale;

And every night in dreams they groan'd
aloud,

To see their sister in her snowy
shroud.

XXXIV

And she had died in drowsy ignorance,
But for a thing more deadly dark
than all;

It came like a fierce potion, drunk by
chance,

Which saves a sick man from the
feather'd pall

For some few gasping moments; like
a lance,

Waking an Indian from his cloudy
hall
With cruel pierce, and bringing him
again
Sense of the gnawing fire at heart and
brain.

xxxv

It was a vision.—In the drowsy gloom,
The dull of midnight, at her couch's
foot
Lorenzo stood, and wept; the forest
tomb
Had marr'd his glossy hair, which
once could shoot
Lustre into the sun, and put cold doom
Upon his lips, and taken the soft lute
From his lorn voice, and past his loamed
ears
Had made a miry channel for his tears.

xxxvi

Strange sound it was, when the pale
shadow spake;
For there was striving, in its piteous
tongue,
To speak as when on earth it was awake,
And Isabella on its music hung:
Languor there was in it, and tremulous
shake,
As in a palsied Druid's sharp unstrung;
And through it moan'd a ghostly under-
song,
Like hoarse night-gusts sepulchral
briars among.

xxxvii

Itseyes, though wild, were still all dewy
bright
With love, and kept all phantom fear
aloof
From the poor girl by magic of their
light,
The while it did unthread the horrid
woof
Of the late darken'd time,—the mur-
derous spite
Of pride and avarice,—the dark pine
roof
In the forest,—and the sodden turfed
dell,
Where, without any word, from stabs
he fell.

xxxviii

Saying moreover, “Isabel, my sweet!
“Red whortle-berries droop above
my head,
“And a large flint-stone weighs upon
my feet;
“Around me beeches and high chest-
nuts shed
“Their leaves and prickly nuts; a sheep-
fold bleat
“Comes from beyond the river to my
bed:
“Go, shed one tear upon my heather-
bloom,
“And it shall comfort me within the
tomb.

XXXIX

“I am a shadow now, alas! alas!

“Upon the skirts of human-nature
dwelling

“Alone: I chant alone the holy mass,

“While little sounds of life are round
me knelling,

“And glossy bees at noon do fieldward
pass,

“And many a chapel bell the hour is
telling,

“Paining me through: those sounds
grow strange to me,

“And thou art distant in Humanity.

XL

“I know what was, I feel full well what
is,

“And I should rage, if spirits could go
mad;

“Though I forget the taste of earthly
bliss,

“That paleness warms my grave, as
though I had

“A Seraph chosen from the bright abyss

“To be my spouse: thy paleness
makes me glad;

“Thy beauty grows upon me, and I
feel

“A greater love through all my essence
steal.”

XLI

The Spirit mourn'd “Adieu!”—dis-
solv'd, and left

The atom darkness in a slow tur-
moil ;
As when of healthful midnight sleep
bereft,
Thinking on rugged hours and fruit-
less toil,
We put our eyes into a pillowy cleft,
And see the spangly gloom froth up
and boil :

It made sad Isabella's eyelids ache,
And in the dawn she started up awake ;

XLII

“Ha ! ha !” said she, “I knew not this
hard life,
“I thought the worst was simple
misery ;
“I thought some Fate with pleasure or
with strife
“Portion'd us—happy days, or else to
die ;
“But there is crime—a brother's bloody
knife !
“Sweet Spirit, thou hast school'd my
infancy :
“I'll visit thee for this, and kiss thine
eyes,
“And greet thee morn and even in the
skies.”

XLIII

When the full morning came, she had
devised
How she might secret to the forest
hie ;

How she might find the clay, so dearly
prized,
And sing to it one latest lullaby ;
How her short absence might be unsur-
mised,
While she the inmost of the dream
would try.

Resolv'd, she took with her an aged
nurse,
And went into that dismal forest-hearse.

XLIV

See, as they creep along the river side,
How she doth whisper to that aged
Dame,
And, after looking round the champaign
wide,
Shows her a knife.—“What feverous
hectic flame
“Burns in thee, child?—What good can
thee betide,
“That thou should'st smile again ?”
—The evening came,
And they had found Lorenzo's earthy
bed ;
The flint was there, the berries at his
head.

XLV

Who hath not loiter'd in a green church-
yard,
And let his spirit, like a demon-mole,
Work through the clayey soil and gravel
hard,

To see skull, coffin'd bones, and
funeral stole ;
Pitying each form that hungry Death
hath marr'd,
And filling it once more with human
soul ?

Ah ! this is holiday to what was felt
When Isabella by Lorenzo knelt.

XLVI

She gaz'd into the fresh-thrown mould,
as though
One glance did fully all its secrets
tell ;
Clearly she saw, as other eyes would
know
Pale limbs at bottom of a crystal well ;
Upon the murderous spot she seem'd to
grow,
Like to a native lily of the dell ;
Then with her knife, all sudden she
began
To dig more fervently than misers
can.

XLVII

Soon she turn'd up a soiled glove, where-
on
Her silk had play'd in purple phan-
tasies,
She kiss'd it with a lip more chill than
stone,
And put it in her bosom, where it
dries

And freezes utterly unto the bone
Those dainties made to still an infant's cries:
Then 'gan she work again; nor stay'd
her care,
But to throw back at times her veiling hair.

XLVIII

That old nurse stood beside her wondering,
Until her heart felt pity to the core
At sight of such a dismal labouring,
And so she kneeled, with her locks all hoar,
And put her lean hands to the horrid thing:
Three hours they laboured at this travail sore;
At last they felt the kernel of the grave,
And Isabella did not stamp and rave.

XLIX

Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?
Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?
O for the gentleness of old Romance,
The simple plaining of a minstrel's song!
Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance,
For here, in truth, it doth not well belong



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· BASIL · POT ·
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To speak:—O turn thee to the very
tale,
And taste the music of that vision pale.

L
With duller steel than the Perséan
sword
They cutaway no formless monster's
head,
But one, whose gentleness did well ac-
cord
With death as life. The ancient harps
have said,
Love never dies, but lives, immortal
Lord:
If Love impersonate was ever dead,
Pale Isabella kiss'd it, and low moan'd.
'Twas love; cold,—dead indeed, but
not dethroned.

LI
In anxious secrecy they took it home,
And then the prize was all for Isabel:
She calm'd its wild hair with a golden
comb,
And all around each eye's sepulchral
cell
Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared
loam
With tears, as chilly as a dripping
well,
She drench'd away:—and still she
combed, and kept
Sighing all day—and still she kiss'd, and
wept.

LII

Then in a silken scarf,—sweet with the
dews
Of precious flowers pluck'd in
Araby,
And divine liquids come with odorous
ooze
Through the cold serpent pipe re-
freshfully,—
She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did
choose
A garden-pot, wherein she laid it
by,
And covered it with mould, and o'er it
set
Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever
wet.

LIII

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and
sun,
And she forgot the blue above the
trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters
run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn
breeze;
She had no knowledge when the day was
done,
And the new morn she saw not: but
in peace
Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,
And moisten'd it with tears unto the
core.

LIV

And so she ever fed it with thin tears,
Whence thick, and green, and beauti-
ful it grew,
So that it smelt more balmy than its
peers
Of Basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew
Nurture besides, and life, from human
fears,
From the fast mouldering head there
shut from view;
So that the jewel, safely casketed,
Came forth and in perfumed leaflets
spread.

LV

O Melancholy, linger here awhile!
O Music, Music, breathe despond-
ingly!
O Echo, Echo, from some sombre isle,
Unknown, Lethean, sigh to us—O
sigh!
Spirits in grief, lift up your heads, and
smile;
Lift up your heads, sweet Spirits,
heavily,
And make a pale light in your cypress
glooms,
Tinting with silver wan your marble
tombs.

LVI

Moan hither, all ye syllables of woe,
From the deep throat of sad Melpo-
mene!

Through bronzed lyre in tragic order
go,
And touch the strings into a mystery;
Sound mournfully upon the winds and
low;
For simple Isabel is soon to be
Among the dead: She withers, like a
palm
Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm.

LVII

O leave the palm to wither by itself;
Let not quick Winter chill its dying
hour!—
It may not be—those Baälites of pelf,
Her brethren, noted the continual
shower
From her dead eyes; and many a curi-
ous elf,
Among her kindred, wonder'd that
such dower
Of youth and beauty should be thrown
aside
By one mark'd out to be a Noble's bride.

LVIII

And, furthermore, her brethren won-
der'd much
Why she sat drooping by the Basil
green,
And why it flourish'd, as by magic
touch;
Greatly they wonder'd what the
thing might mean:

They could not surely give belief, that
such
A very nothing would have power to
wean
Her from her own fair youth, and plea-
sures gay,
And even remembrance of her love's
delay.

LIX

Therefore they watch'd a time when
they might sift
This hidden whim; and long they
watch'd in vain;
For seldom did she go to chapel-shrift,
And seldom felt she any hunger-
pain;
And when she left, she hurried back as
swift
As bird on wing to breast its eggs
again;
And, patient as a hen-bird, sat her there
Beside her Basil, weeping through her
hair.

LX

Yet they contriv'd to steal the Basil-
pot,
And to examine it in secret place:
The thing was vile with green and livid
spot,
And yet they knew it was Lorenzo's
face:
The guerdon of their murder they had
got,

And so left Florence in a moment's
space,
Never to turn again.—Away they
went,
With blood upon their heads, to banish-
ment.

LXI

O Melancholy, turn thine eyes away !
O Music, Music, breathe despond-
ingly !
O Echo, Echo, on some other day,
From isles Lethean, sigh to us—O
sigh !
Spirits of grief, sing not your “Well-a
way !”
For Isabel, sweet Isabel, will die ;
Will die a death too lone and incom-
plete,
Now they have ta'en away her Basil
sweet.

LXII

Piteous she look'd on dead and senseless
things,
Asking for her lost Basil amorously :
And with melodious chuckle in the
strings
Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes
would cry
After the Pilgrim in his wanderings,
To ask him where her Basil was ; and
why
’Twas hid from her : “For cruel ’tis,”
said she,

“To steal my Basil-potaway from me.”

LXIII

And so she pined, and so she died for-
lorn,

Imploring for her Basil to the last.

No heart was there in Florence but did
mourn

In pity of her love, so overcast.

And a sad ditty of this story born
From mouth to mouth through all
the country pass'd:

Still is the burthen sung—“O cruelty,
“To steal my Basil-potaway from me!”

N O T E

JOHN KEATS, 1796-1821

*In Isabella; or the Pot of Basil we have one of the
maturest poems written by this poet of Beauty.*

*It is based on Philemon's Story in Boccaccio's
"Decameron," and was written by Keats while at
Teignmouth, two years before his death. The poet
was then in his twenty-fourth year.*



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